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ABSTRACT

The arguments for deschooling expressed by Ivan Illich a quarter of a century ago have relevance today. We are in danger of losing their most salient insights; perhaps because the critique was phrased in this oversimplified binary form, excessive institutionalization should be countered by deinstitutionalization, professionalism by deprofessionalization. Experimentation and challenges to the formal system have resulted, but they have not had a substantial impact on the formal system's character or growth. If such binarism were replaced by a focus on the character and quality of relationships between institutions and between individuals, more positive lines forward might be seen in theory and in policy. The argument can be pursued by reference to social capital. Three scholars dominate the debate. Expositions of James Coleman and Pierre Bourdieu are especially relevant to education and human capital; Robert Putnam's work acts as a more general reference point. The key merit of social capital is its focus on qualities of relationships rather than on individual achievements and attributes. The relationships can be at the individual or collective level. Social capital is relevant to debates on lifelong learning. It encourages a look at education and learning systems in terms of networks rather than hierarchies and builds into the analysis an emphasis on the informal side of learning, as compared with a preoccupation with institutional learning. (Contains 13 references.) (YLB)

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FROM SCHOLARISATION TO SOCIAL CAPITAL

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FROM SCHOLARISATION TO SOCIAL CAPITAL

Tom Schuller

Deschooling: a relevant notion?

Upwards of 30 years ago, Ivan Illich launched his campaign against the schooling of society (Illich 1971). The attack on the educational system was the first of a number of memorably-titled assaults – 'medical nemesis' being perhaps the outstanding example - on the galloping professionalisation which Illich saw as undermining people's capacity to control their own lives. It may or may not be fair to call Illich a libertarian; certainly part of his argument was that we were becoming more rule-bound and that the state was assuming too much of an interventionist role. In many European countries a high proportion of professionally qualified people work in the public sector, especially in education, so that intentionally or not Illich's critique of professionalisation became part of a wider critique of the post-war democratic consensus. If not always formally social democrat, regimes had tended until then to accept the principles of extensive welfare provision, direct taxation as a necessary means of publicly funding such provision and an optimism in relation to the state's capacity to solve social problems. Along with this went secure employment and high status for professionals such as teachers and doctors, seen as the channels through which welfare was delivered, with quite low levels of transparency or accountability. Attacks on this came from both left and right – which in those days had little difficulty in defining themselves – with Marxists and free-marketers singing at least partly the same song.

Given unexpected political missile status by Mrs Thatcher and others, these critiques led in some measure to a significant dismantling of welfare provision, and the attack on excessive professionalism has contributed to the erosion of the standing of some occupations. However, as we can now see, the result was not a set of more equal power relations, although the picture is a complex one. At the material level, income and wealth in the UK and the US are now very much more unequally distributed, and since (in the UK at least) this has been accompanied by the marketisation of many services and a corresponding increase in the significance of disposable income as a means of securing them, access to such services is heavily skewed. Although the state may have been rolled back, the vacated terrain has often been for the average citizen more of a minefield than a fruitful plot to cultivate for themselves.

The balance of power has undoubtedly swung away from the comfortable and often paternalist professionalism of the post-war decades. On the one hand, therefore, it may look as if Illich's general line of critique has at least partly prevailed, albeit in significantly mutated form. In health, for example, some large institutions such as long-stay mental hospitals have been dismantled. There is less of an assumption that the salaried professional knows best. Sometimes this scepticism takes the form of a very crude individualised consumerism, which seeks to transform every relationship into a market relationship governed by a seller-customer model; but it can also result from a strenuous wish to make the best use of limited resources, especially in the provision of key services where public funding is central. Most professional services, especially in the public sector, now accept the case for greater transparency and

accountability, even though the instruments for implementing this may be hotly contested (Power 1997).

In spite of these changes it is hard to sustain the argument that deinstitutionalisation has occurred, at least in education. First, there are vastly more people within the formal education system than 20 years ago. For demographic reasons there may not numerically be more schools, but there are certainly far more colleges and institutions of higher education than there were two decades ago. Almost every government is committed to retaining a higher proportion than ever before of its young people in the education system. Whilst this opens up opportunities for some, for others, arguably, it contributes to what has been called 'neoteny' - the prolonged retention of juvenile characteristics into adulthood (Hope 1998 p 47). Whilst many are still excluded from higher education (and their position is made relatively even worse by the general extension), large numbers of students proceed from school to university less out of positive choice than because this is something their peers are doing, and because the system offers no better option.

Secondly, schools, colleges and universities have themselves become more bureaucratised. Targets are set, on which financial survival, or at least reasonable prosperity, depends. Sets of formalised rules and transactions apply to staff and students that make college life more closely resemble that of many other institutions. The trend towards more evident management has attracted much criticism, especially from within the system. In some cases the criticism is fully justified, as crass management approaches undermine effective education; in other cases the criticisms are driven by some rather dubious assumptions about earlier democratic academic communities.

Thirdly, and more ambiguously, calls for lifelong learning are nearing neurotic levels of intensity. 'Learning organisations', 'learning regions', and learning societies proliferate, at least as badges or as aspirations. Campaigns are mounted to persuade citizens of the value of learning. The trend extends to making some forms of adult learning compulsory – the most recent, highly significant, example being the agreement of the British Medical Association that doctors should be obliged to undertake regular training if they wish to retain their right to practice. Might 'education permanente' really mean what it says – a society where everyone is permanently engaged in education, leaving little space or time for other activities?

The arguments for deschooling so provocatively expressed by Ivan Illich a quarter of a century ago have relevance today, but we are in danger of losing their most salient insights. This may be because the critique was phrased in an oversimplified binary form – excessive institutionalisation should be countered by deinstitutionalisation, the demons of professionalism are to be countered by deprofessionalisation and so on. Although it is clear that some experimentation, and challenges to the formal system, have followed from this, they have not had a substantial impact on the formal system, in either its character or its growth. If such binarism was replaced by a focus on *the character and quality of relationships*, between institutions and between individuals, we might see more positive lines forward, theoretically and in policy. I pursue the argument by reference to the notion of social capital.

Interpreting social capital

Three scholars dominate the debate on social capital, Robert Putnam, James Coleman and Pierre Bourdieu. The expositions of the latter two are especially relevant to education and human capital, but Putnam's work acts as a more general reference point.

Putnam defines social capital as "the features of social life - networks, norms and trust - that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives." (Putnam 1996 p66). His original work was on the quality of government in north and south Italy (Putnam et al 1993); he has built on this by drawing on extensive time-budget surveys of Americans in succeeding decades to record extensive civic disengagement, as measured by participation in all forms of political or civic activity, from direct involvement in political parties to going bowling together as club members. Putnam's focus is not on education; but he does note that although education is generally positively correlated with civic activity, the huge increase in education over the last three decades has not halted the decline in civic engagement.

James Coleman acknowledges the diversity, if not the diffuseness, of the concept. "Social capital is defined by its function. It is not a single entity but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors - whether persons or corporate actors - within the structure." (1988 pS98).
Coleman goes on to specify three forms of social capital. The first deals with the level of trust which exists in the social environment and the actual extent of obligations held. Social capital is high where people trust each other, and where this trust is exercised by the mutual acceptance of obligations. The second form concerns information channels; here Coleman cites a university as a place where social capital is maintained by colleagues supplying each other with ideas and information. Thirdly, norms and sanctions constitute social capital where they encourage or constrain people to work for a common good, forgoing immediate self-interest.

Coleman then turns to examining the effect of social capital in creating human capital, in the family and in the community. Family background plays a large part in educational achievement (Coleman concentrates on schooling), first through financial capital - the wealth which provides school materials, a place to study at home and so on; and secondly through human capital, measured approximately by parental levels of education and influencing the child's cognitive environment. To this Coleman adds social capital, defined in terms of the relationship between parents and children. By this he means not so much the emotional relationship as the amount of effort parents put directly into their children's learning. On this reckoning, one could have high levels of financial and human capital but low social capital - for instance in a high-status dual-earning household where both parents were too busy with their careers to provide direct support for the children, though presumably direct parental effort can be substituted for to some extent by relatives or paid help.

At the community level, social capital involves the extent to which parents reinforce each other's norms, and the closeness of parents' relations with community institutions. Where households move frequently, and little social interchange occurs between the adult members of the community, social capital is likely to be low. This

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may occur even where financial and human capital levels are high, which Coleman uses to explain why some Catholic schools in poor but relatively stable neighbourhoods outperform many private schools: "the choice of private school for many of these parents is an individualistic one, and, although they back their children with extensive human capital, they send their children to school denuded of social capital." (1988 pS114).

Rightly or wrongly, Coleman and Putnam have been depicted as functionalist in their approach. Such critics often turn instead to Pierre Bourdieu, who included social capital as one of the three basic forms of capital, alongside the better known forms of economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986; Bourdieu includes a rather opaque reference to symbolic capital in a footnote; notably he ignores human capital altogether). Bourdieu initially describes social capital as "made up of social obligations ('connections'), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of a title of mobility " (1985 p242) . This aggregate-type definition is followed by comments which give it an individualised status: "The volume of social capital possessed by a given agent thus depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize and on the volume of the capital (economic, cultural or symbolic) possessed in his own right by each of those to whom he is connected. This means that, although it is relatively irreducible to the economic and cultural capital possessed by a given agent, or even by the whole set of agents to whom he is connected, social capital is never completely independent of it because the exchanges instituting mutual acknowledgement presuppose the reacknowledgement of a minimum of objective homogeneity, and because it exerts a multiplier effect on the capital he possesses in his own right." (ibid. p252)

Are Bourdieu's definitions contradictory? Perhaps, and in that sense they are both revelatory of the weakness of social capital as a concept and indicative of its potential fruitfulness. Just as Bourdieu asserts both that economic capital is the most fundamental form and that the other forms are not reducible to it, so he treats social capital both as an aggregate of human behaviour and an individual possession.

Social capital as a function of relationships

Although social capital can be interpreted as an individual attribute, its key merit in my view is to switch the focus away from the participating agents, whether these be persons or organisations, on to the relationships between them. It is in this sense that many of Illich's proposals for an alternative system are based recognisably on the notion of social capital, even though he does not use the term as such. This is most obvious in the chapter entitled 'learning webs', but it pervades many of the pages of *Deschooling Society*.[1]

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[1] For example: "We must learn to estimate the social value of work and leisure by the educational give-and-take for which they offer opportunity. Effective participation in the politics of a street, a work place, the library, a news programme or a hospital is therefore the best measuring stick to evaluate their level as educational institutions." (Illich 1971 p30)

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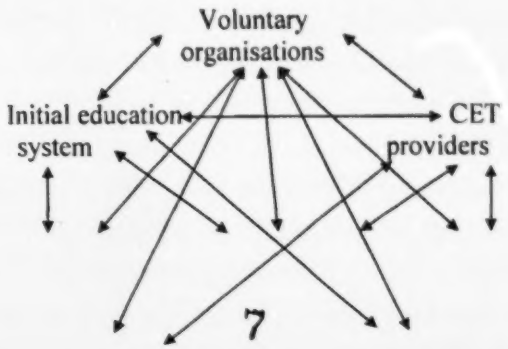
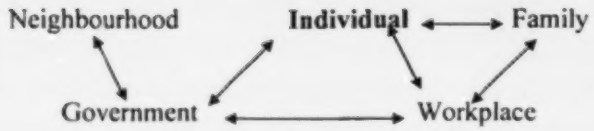
The relationships can be at the individual or the collective level. The focus of a relational approach would then be not on the number of contacts which any individual possesses, but the nature of the contacts: what their basis is, whether they are active or dormant, the strength of reciprocity and trust exhibited, and so on. Similarly, the patterns of individual participation which define Putnam's civic engagement would be looked at in more qualitative terms, with the focus being not on whether or not the individual is a member of organisations but on the quality of the relationship they have with them. Several authors who have used the basic measures of organisational membership as an indicator of social capital acknowledge that without some index of intensity and commitment, the data are extremely limited. This is all the more true when such measures are aggregated up into a single numerical index.

At the organisational level a focus on relationships involves broadening the analysis to cover the kinds of procedures and institutions which govern inter-institutional relations, formally or informally. One example would be the role of professional bodies in setting norms and standards; another would be the extent to which organisations operating in the same area share information through newsletters, electronic media or social gatherings. The dividing line between this and previous categories is of course not clearcut. Investigating relationships is likely to involve analysing patterns of individual behaviour. But the shift of focus is nevertheless highly significant in its implications, both for our conceptual understanding of social capital, and for the methodologies employed to analyse it.

In a study of continuing education in Scotland, we developed a focus on relationships which took the following form (Schuller and Bamford 1998). A parallel study was carried out in Northern Ireland by John Field, using similar methodology (Field 1998), and my comments here draw on the project as a whole (see Schuller and Field 1999). We presented a diagram which simply laid out a set of lines between the various stakeholders involved . The individual learner (or potential learner) was at the centre of the diagram, but the focus was on the lines between the different agents: providers of initial education; providers of continuing education and training; professional bodies; families and communities; employers; and the state. (Obviously this is a limited list, but it generated a sufficiently complex set of relationships for us not to wish to expand it further.) We asked respondents – participants in focus groups and individual interviewees – to comment on whichever of the relationships seemed to them important. We encouraged general observations, but we also invited specific comment on two aspects: the *sharing of information*; and the extent to which the agents had *a common understanding of goals*.

SOURCES OF SOCIAL CAPITAL





This network has a limited number of members, but still generates a large number of possible relationships. The interviews in both Scotland and Northern Ireland explored the significance of these relationships: their strengths and weaknesses, and their implications for adult learning.

The relationship between initial and continuing education emerged as complex and evolving. In particular, the attitudes which schooling has engendered in adults are likely to endure for some while. These include a highly conservative view of education and what it is expected to deliver; and a strong sense of the education system as something to which responsibility for educational achievement is 'contracted out'. The impact of the extension of IE, notably through the rapid rise in graduates, is as yet unclear. There is some evidence that its impact on motivation to learn throughout life is at best ambiguous, and possibly negative. What this suggests is that the relationship between an expansion of initial education and the desired end of a society in which people learn throughout their lives deserves far closer and more critical scrutiny.

This is obviously only one way of approaching the analysis of relationships, and we settled on it only relatively late in the fieldwork. So it remains to be tested in greater depth and with more rigour than we were able to. However one feature of this approach is worth emphasising in this discussion of relationships. As I have just noted, the second characteristic which we attempted to probe was the extent to which agents had a common understanding of goals. This differs significantly from the standard definition of social capital, offered by Putnam and adopted by many subsequent authors, of social capital as networks, norms and trust which foster the efficient pursuit of *shared objectives*. This definition clearly links social capital to stronger forms of communitarianism, with the stipulation of shared objectives. Our approach allows for divergent objectives, but stresses the possibility of a common understanding on the part of the stakeholders of each others' objectives, even where they do not share them.

A final observation relates to the *scope* of the networks within which relationships are observed. As with cooperation, there is often an implicit assumption that social capital has a strongly *local* orientation. This is understandable, especially in contexts where social capital is seen as a defence against the impact of globalisation on social relationships and local economic structures. But there seems to me to be no inherent requirement that the focus should be local. Social capital can be developed *globally*, as shown by some of the environmental activist groups who use electronic means of sharing information but also of building intercontinental morale amongst themselves.

Conclusion

It may well be that retaining young people in a formal education system actually detracts from their motivation to become lifelong learners, outweighing the benefits

which may be claimed for a more 'solid' schooling. This is exactly the kind of radical thinking which Illich engaged in; had he been listened to more carefully, and perhaps been less dismissive of the efforts of educational reformers to achieve change from within, the subsequent expansion of education might have been qualitatively different.

Social capital is relevant to today's debate on lifelong learning for at least three reasons:

- it focuses on the qualities of relationships rather than on individual achievements and attributes
- it encourages us to look at education and learning systems in terms of networks rather than hierarchies (Castells 1998)
- it builds into the analysis an emphasis on the informal side of learning, as compared with a preoccupation with institutional learning.

In a policy context, social capital can be used to broaden our approach to the development of skills and knowledge. Too much attention is being paid to the supply side, and inadequate attention to the levels of demand for human capital, ie the way skills and knowledge are actually utilised, in workplaces or in society more generally (see eg Coffield 1999). We need to gear more of the analysis to the sets of relationships within which learning takes place and is applied. This means investigating the quality of those relationships, rather than focussing on stocks of human capital in the shape of time spent on education and training or numbers of qualifications achieved. In this way we might achieve a shift of focus, from a scholarised society to one where social capital abounds.

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